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Your Message Across**

***The Essential Reference for
Teachers, Trainers,
Presenters, and Speakers***

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Small-Group Discussion

Definition

Small-group discussion allows presenters to announce a topic or idea for group discussion among participants. A small-group discussion follows democratic guidelines and allows everyone to contribute many ideas for others to discuss and reflect upon. Discussion allows for an interchange of ideas within the context of a group under the direction of a presenter.

Introduction

Whenever groups of people congregate in the same place, they will talk with one another. It is human nature to be curious about our surroundings and other people, and the best way to find out answers to our questions is to talk with one another. A discussion may be information based, concentrating on facts, or it may focus on personal opinion and feelings. People enjoy discussions and the arenas of thought they uncover. Talking with friends reveals attitudes and values and offers insight into ways of solving personal problems.

New ideas can be evaluated and tested using the discussion method. Small-group discussions, under the guidance of a presenter, discuss issues to achieve understanding and consensus after much consideration of the viewpoints and ideas of others. Its goals are to spark new thought and concept exploration, encourage analysis of factual information, and develop open-mindedness toward new attitudes and beliefs, so as to accept the opinions of others.

Small-group discussions serve intellectual, emotional, and social purposes. Intellectually, discussion helps participants become aware of the diversity of opinions on an issue. It also allows participants to realize the complexity of issues when they walk away from a discussion with more questions than when they went into the discussion. This is good because it helps them to think about all the possibilities. The participants must discern the difference between fact and opinion and thus they must practice the skill of listening.

Emotionally, the participants may have some sort of personal involvement in the issue they are discussing, making it important to them. Others should be sensitive to this. Participants want others to realize that their opinions matter, and once the group responds to this, each participant retains a feeling of self-worth. This is an important affective quality that is key to the building of self-confidence and a sense of belonging.

Socially, group discussion builds a sense of cohesion and trust with one another. Discussion groups are an arena in which differences in opinion, race, gender, and participation should be accepted and celebrated. Differences allow for the diffusion of new ideas and attitudes. Group work of any sort helps participants build their interpersonal skills and confidence about offering individual opinions in a group atmosphere.

A well-conducted group discussion will end in acceptance of different opinions, respect for well-supported beliefs, and improved problem-solving skills. Overall, it will promote the sharing of information and all members will gain insight concerning the thoughts of others before reaching consensus on a topic. Bellon, Bellon, and Blank (1992) believe participants in small groups concentrate better on the topic at hand due to the support of their peers and individual motivation.

Main Procedural Steps in Using Small-Group Discussion

The purpose of the small-group discussion is to contribute and circulate information on a particular topic and analyze and evaluate the information for supported evidence in order to reach an agreement on general conclusions. To do this, several steps must be taken when conducting small-group discussions.

Step 1: Introduction

The presenter must prepare before the discussion for it to be successful. The presenter should try to introduce a topic on which all

of the participants have some background knowledge so they have a basis for discussion. If the participants are introduced to a topic that is familiar to them, each will have something to contribute that another participant may not have thought of, thus moving the discussion on its way with many new avenues of thought to explore. The introduction should have four parts.

1. *Instructional Objective.* An instructional objective should be given to the participants at the beginning of the discussion.
2. *Purpose.* The presenter should explain why the groups will be discussing the chosen topic.
3. *Relationship.* The presenter must explain how this information fits in with what has already been learned or what will be learned in the future.
4. *Advanced Organizer.* An advanced organizer is some sort of attention-grabber that attracts participants' interest. Many discussion topics fail because participants aren't drawn into the discussion at the beginning.

The presenter may have to help the participants understand how small-group discussion works to help them make the most of their time. Participants must understand the difference between a discussion and an unguided expression of opinion without pertinent information or facts. Participants might have to do a little research beforehand to get acquainted with the presenter's selected topic. Brookfield (1990) suggests choosing topics that are not too fact oriented or lacking in controversy to spark creative thought and diverse responses.

Step 2: Directing the Discussion

The presenter is in charge of directing the discussion to get it started. The presenter should ask the participants if they have questions about the topic at hand. These questions can start the discussion, or the presenter may want to ask a few questions from a prepared list to stimulate thought toward the topic. Another way to begin the discussion is to ask the participants to recall and share personal events that have happened in their lives that relate to the topic. This is a good way to get everyone involved. Questions are excellent motivators for discussion.

Sometimes the participants will take different thought paths and deviate from the instructional objective, so the presenter might have to reroute the thinking. Leading questions from the presenter can direct the participants back to the topic. These questions should

not be answered with a yes-or-no answer. They should contain key words and relate to the objective of the discussion. These presenter-guided questions will be a model for participants to ask of the peers in their group. King and Rosenshine (1993) found that participants who ask thought-provoking questions in small-group discussions encourage creative answers that increase the learning potential for all.

Once the discussion begins, questions are essential in keeping the discussion moving. They can bring the discussion back on track or emphasize an important concept. They can draw in shy or non-participating individuals and can be key in checking for understanding.

As the presenter directs the discussion, he or she should decide whether or not the participants are spending too much time on insignificant points. The presenter should try to keep control of the discussion, yet not dominate it. To avoid having the discussion centered around the presenter, he or she should try to enter in only when necessary.

Step 3: Summarizing the Discussion

Sometimes the participants may be confused or retain a wrong idea as right. The presenter should summarize to make sure the participants understand what has been discussed. For small-group discussions seeking consensus, it is important to summarize to make sure all the participants are thinking along the same lines. A final summary is essential at the end of the discussion. Conclusions should be recorded on the chalkboard so all can see them. The presenter should ask the participants how they would use the information. At times, a discussion will result in the participants' having incorrect ideas. Basically, summarization is helpful for clearing up confusion, covering main points, ending a discussion, and conveying consensus.

Variations of Small-Group Discussion

Cooperative Learning Groups

In cooperative learning, a small group of participants works together to achieve a common goal. Cooperative learning operates on the premise that participants achieve more when they work together. The goals of cooperative learning are positive interdependence, face-to-face interaction among participants, individual accountability within the group, and interpersonal and small-group skills. This teaching method fosters cognitive development in the areas of retention

and achievement and affective development through socialization and self-esteem. Henson (1993) notes that small-group discussions allow the participants to get to know each other on a personal level and give them a sense of belonging to a team.

Problem-Solving Groups

These groups exist in order to cooperate, discover, inquire, and think critically. For example, several participants might work together to solve mathematical problems through exploration. The purpose of the problem-solving groups is to approach real-life problems with an appropriate strategy. The participants find many approaches to the problem and test them for the best possible solution. Cooper (1990) states that problem-solving groups help participants come to logical solutions and make responsible decisions.

Group Investigation

The presenter breaks participants up into small groups based on particular interests. Each group has a certain category, and they gather information and analyze it for meaning. The participants then prepare and deliver a presentation to the class about what they discovered. The process teaches participants to work together, listen to one another, and support each others' work and opinions. This is a group-skill-building teaching method that strengthens peer interaction.

Appropriate Uses, Suggestions, and Cautions

The group discussion requires great skill on the part of the presenter. The presenter must encourage participants to participate freely and still keep the discussion on the topic. During the discussion, the presenter must help the participants to understand how all the opinions and facts relate to the topic. For the presenter to conduct the discussion successfully, he or she must carefully plan it in advance.

The presenter must identify the objectives of the discussion. These objectives should be relevant to the needs of the participant, and the participants should have some prior knowledge of the topic. An introduction should be used to explain to the participants why they need to accomplish this objective. The presenter should conduct the small-group discussion with leading questions. Summaries should be used by the presenter to check for agreement and understanding. Charts, models, or actual objects might help the participants understand what is being discussed.

A few cautions are in order. Some participants may want to talk all at once. The group will have to generate some sort of courtesy system to allow everyone to express his or her opinion at different times so all may hear. Some participants may not want to talk at all. The presenter may have to ask a few leading questions and encourage one of the more aggressive participants in the group to speak. One or two participants might monopolize the conversation. The presenter should explain the importance of letting everyone contribute. Some participants may strongly disagree on points and fight with one another. In this case, the presenter must carefully draw the topic to a neutral point so both may see the strengths and weaknesses of their arguments.

Advantages, Disadvantages, and Limitations of Small-Group Discussion

When using the small-group discussion, the presenter should be aware of the following advantages, disadvantages, and limitations of this instructional strategy.

Advantages of Small-Group Discussion

1. All participants in the group can participate.
2. It is a good way to get participants interested in a topic.
3. Participants may more easily understand another participant's explanation than a presenter's explanation.
4. The presenter can identify participants who need assistance.
5. The presenter can identify individual opinions about the topic.
6. It helps the participant see relationships among ideas or concepts related to the topic at hand (U. S. Professional Teacher Training, 1983).

Disadvantages of Small-Group Discussion

1. It is time-consuming.
2. Some participants in the group may do all the talking.
3. It involves less presenter involvement than other methods.
4. The discussion can easily get off track.

Limitations of Small-Group Discussion

1. It is not a method that transmits information or facts.
2. It involves more talk and less action.
3. The discussion must be carefully planned, not impulsive, to be effective.

Examples or Applications

The small-group discussion may have as its aim to come to some sort of definite goal or decision based on consensus; for example, "What is the best way for participants to study Shakespeare?" But small-group discussion can also be used for stimulating new ideas and insights without really aiming for a particular decision; for example, "What are some ethical guidelines politicians should follow?"

Each topic should begin with leading questions to direct participants in the desired pattern of thought toward a topic; for example, "What is the whole impact of recycling on a global basis, and what actions can we take to continue this renewing process?" or "How serious is the damage we have done to our earth?" or "What can we do individually or collectively to make a difference?"

Summary

Small-group discussion develops the cognitive and affective abilities of participants. It is a process of freely sharing information and insights among peers in a welcoming environment under the guidance of a presenter. Individual effort is encouraged to make a strong team with creative ideas. Meloth and Deering (1994) note that groups are more likely to devote a collective effort toward their prescribed task and become more focused on their goal when in cooperative groups.

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The Small-Group Discussion Planning Sheet

Date: _____ Time: _____ Site: _____

Purpose Statement:

Specific Topic/Question to Be Discussed:

Relationship to Former/Future Learning:

Advanced Organizer:

Directions for Organizing Groups:

Directions for Discussion:

Plan for Sharing With Entire Assembly:

Handouts (if any):

Equipment (if any):

Summary Notes:

The Small-Group Discussion Evaluation Sheet

(🍏 You may wish to have someone else consider these items,
as well as evaluating yourself.)

🍏 Was the purpose stated clearly? Yes No (Explain)

🍏 Was there a clear relationship to former/future learning?
 Yes No (Explain)

🍏 How well did the advanced organizer engage participants?

Was the specific topic/question a natural outgrowth of the
advanced organizer?

🍏 Was the topic appropriate for these participants?
 Yes No (Explain)

🍏 Were directions clear and logical? Yes No (Explain)

🍏 How well did the facilitator manage any tendency to stray
from the topic? Yes No (Explain)

Was there a sharing of information with the entire assembly?
 Yes No (Explain)

🍏 Did this contribute to general understanding?
 Yes No (Explain)

🍏 Did the summary clarify and bring effective closure to the
activity? Yes No (Explain)

🍏 What was the most effective aspect of this learning session?

🍏 Suggestions for improvement: